

## **Westford Health Issues Alert on West Nile Virus**

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) announced on 8/14 that a mosquito tested from a pool in Westford, has been confirmed to have West Nile Virus (WNV). The mosquitoes that carry the virus, the *Culex* species is common throughout the state. The Health Department wants to provide information about the virus and what you can do to protect yourself and your family from exposure.

The West Nile Virus grows in birds and is transmitted from bird to bird and from birds to humans by mosquitoes. Horses bitten by mosquitoes carrying WNV can also become sick. The virus, which is thought to have originated in Africa and Asia, was first identified in the US in the summer of 1999. It is unclear how it got to the US.

WNV is spread only by adult mosquitoes that are infected with the virus. People and horses that get the disease cannot spread it without the mosquitoes. The risk of getting the disease is greatest from July through September but remains through October or until the first frost.

West Nile Virus encephalitis is a rare disease caused by the virus. A very small percentage of people who are infected by the virus can become seriously ill. It can be fatal. Those most prone to serious complications include the elderly, very young, and those who are immune-compromised. Mild WNV infections cause fevers, headache and body aches, often with a skin rash and swollen lymph nodes. Many infected persons will not seek treatment, as the symptoms will be flu like and mild. More severe infections can cause headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma tremors, convulsions and paralysis.

There is no vaccine or treatment for the WNV infection but the symptoms of WNV encephalitis can be treated.

Residents are urged to **always** protect themselves and pets against mosquito bites. You should do the following:

- Avoid outdoor activities between dusk and dawn when mosquito activity is greatest.
- Wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants if outdoors when mosquitoes are active.
- Use a repellent containing DEET except on infants. Avoid concentrations above 10-15% for children and concentrations above 30-35 % for adults. Cream, lotion or stick formula is the best.
- Cover arms and legs of children when playing outdoors and use netting to cover a baby's carriage or playpen.
- Fix holes in screens and windows.
- Remove any standing water on your property including trash cans, pots, recycle bins and pool covers.
- Pay special attention to tires, as they are a common place for mosquitoes to breed.
- Turnover plastic wheelbarrows and wading pools when not in use.
- Clean clogged roof gutters and remove leaves and debris that may prevent drainage of rainwater.
- Do not allow water to stagnate in birdbaths, aerate ornamental ponds and stock them with fish.
- Keep swimming pools clean and properly chlorinated.
- Use landscaping to eliminate standing water that collects on your property.

For additional information contact Sandy Collins, Director of Health Care Services or Darren MacCaughey, Director of Environmental Services @ 978 692-5509 or the MDPH hotline (1-866-627-7968). For information on mosquito spraying/testing in our area contact the Central Massachusetts Mosquito Control Project @ 508-393-3055 between 7AM –3:30 PM Monday-Friday.